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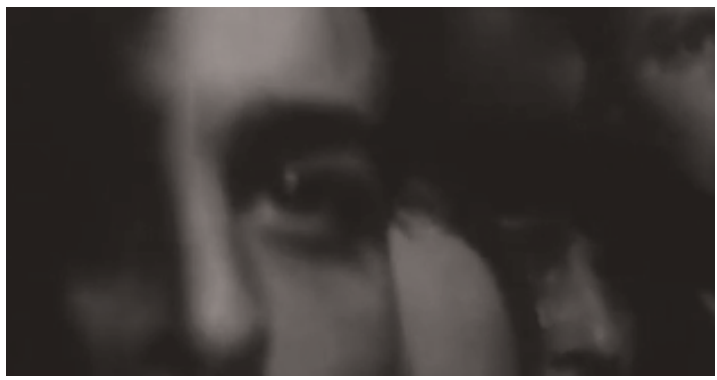

https://vimeo.com/119051190

Vivian Sobchack: As a phenomenologist, I very often, although certainly not always, begin with my own specific experience as I start thinking and writing something. And then I generalize these specifics as larger structures of experience. [*…E*]*ven when I'm in first person mode, I leave 'me'* (*in the egological sense*) *to look at the structure of the experience I'm writing about, to move into the domain of a more general experiential structure that anybody might inhabit. I start from me but it's not about me.*

[…]

Scott Bukatman [*to Sobchack*]*: It seems to me that what you do is a close reading of a medium.* [*… Y*]*ou may use a work to illuminate the medium itself.*[1]

I first saw the sequence from René Clément's 1963 wartime resistance romance *Le Jour et l'heure* (*The Day and the Hour*) when film critic David

Cairns shared it at his daily blog *Shadowplay*.[2] I had such a strong reaction to it that I immediately downloaded the clip in order to bring it into the space of my video-editing programme. I knew I had to explore it there in the mode that Walter Benjamin describes as 'criticism' – that is to say, by performing 'an experiment on the work of art itself'.[3]

Of the sequence, Cairns wrote,

> [t]he truest, awfulest form of claustrophobia is not the feeling of the walls closing in, but of people closing in. Claustrophobia of the flesh – other people's and our own. So the most impressive sequence in […] *Le Jour et l'heure* is a desperate passage through a crowded train, where Henri Decaë's camera jostles about realistically, creating an entirely new form of camera movement, nosing left and right as it nudges its way through the resisting mass of travellers. [We] squeeze along in little surges, like blood from a wound.

Unlike Cairns, I did not especially fix onto feelings of claustrophobia, even though this is what the scene in its entirety represents on behalf of its generic suspense narrative. However, I really liked his blood-pulsing analogy, which seemed to me to encapsulate the way I, as a spectator, had been drawn in by the events shown in this most curious sequence. I had been utterly gripped by the way it figured and provoked anxious bodily movement – both on screen *and* off screen (*in me*) – at once showing and engendering what phenomenologist-philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call 'motor intentionality' ('intentional activities that essentially involve our bodily, situational understanding of space and spatial features'),[4] as well as what phenomenological film theorist Vivian Sobchack describes as 'mimetic sympathy' (a kind of bodily miming of what we see).[5]

As I repeatedly returned to Cairns' video clip I realised I wanted to work *through it* to create a phenomenological sequel to an earlier audiovisual collage of mine, *Touching the Film Object*.[6] This 2011 video offered a brief 'immersive' exploration of issues of sensuous proximity, contiguity, and contact in experiencing or studying films – what theorist Laura U. Marks called 'hapticity'. It quoted from Marks' 2004 work 'Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes'[7] as it meditated upon a slowed sequence from the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, the 1966 film's original soundtrack replaced by an intricate electronica accompaniment excerpted from an experimental collaboration by musicians Robert Lippok and Beatrice Martini.

I did not know what I was going to say in, or indeed do with, my new work on the Clément film sequence; I just began with (bodily) feelings and

only the merest hint of a (cognitive) hunch, and proceeded to experiment in the same way I had with earlier video: *intuitively*. I trimmed the sequence down to (for me) its most compelling part, sourced music to replace the film's original audio track, and slowed the excerpt from its actual one-minute duration to a length of four minutes and twenty seconds in order to synch it to the music. Then I made a few further (small) temporal adjustments to create, or intensify, particular rhymes and shared or contrasting rhythms between the sound and the image tracks.

The music for *Carnal Locomotive* was not an especially obvious choice, superficially at least. An almost upbeat, soft, and melodic reggae-dubstep track by Christian Björklund that I had found and favorited at the Free Music Archive a few weeks before,[8] it affords a somewhat calming and, at moments, expansive counterpoint to the film's deeply anxious *and crowded* images. As soon as I played the music again, I knew it would work in the way I was beginning to want; it offers the video collage (and its audio-viewers) a toe or finger tapping, head swaying *groove*, a 'sense of propulsive rhythmic "feel" or […] "swing"'.[9] Grooves are normally created by the interaction of the different elements of music played by a band's rhythm section. In the case of audiovisual material, they can surely connect with and extend to onscreen bodily movements and visual rhythms and pulsations as these play out, and beyond (performatively, mimetically) to spectators, too.

Reviewing the sequence from *Le Jour et l'heure* over and over again, even at its original speed, I was insistently reminded of Sobchack's work, in particular of *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, her 2004 book that challenged the mind/body split in much of media studies in its use of phenomenological approaches and theories and its emphasis on corporeal rather than intellectual engagements with film. When (only *after* I had created my initial sound-image mix) I finally picked up the book to explore this memory, perhaps to search for a quotation I could use, my eyes alighted not on Sobchack's own words but (fittingly for my own citational context and aesthetic) on ones she had borrowed, indeed partly re-purposed and de-contextualised, from the work of other authors (Claude Lévi-Strauss and Steven Shaviro).[10]

The sense of performing, or choreographing, a groove returned as I proceeded to set the text to the video. A tightly rhythmic approach immediately imposed itself through the use, nonetheless, of a fairly subtle variety of kinetic typography[11] performed in close concert with the musical beats and accents. In this immersive film studies experiment, editing in the text with attention to very precise and dynamic effects of semantic-rhythmic

interaction with the visual track was much more important than it had been in *Touching the Film Object*. That video had performed the contingency of an *unpredictable* flow between critical distance and haptic intimacy, and so relied on the absence of an easily-discernible musical (and visual) rhythm. In contrast, *Carnal Locomotive* urges its viewers and their bodies to enter more fully (corporeally, *carnally*) into a rhythmic engagement with what they see and hear, in order to feel more *on track*, *in a groove*, as part of a greater sympathetic engagement with the visual matter of Clément's film sequence.

Through coming to 'cope with' the intricacies of the audiovisual rhythms in this practical way, phenomenological theorists like Sobchack might argue that viewers – and, indeed, scholarly video-essayists – are more likely to be able to reach a practical 'bodily sort of understanding' of what they are presented with in this work, as Tiger C. Roholt puts it in his recent study of rhythmic nuance.[12] For Roholt, 'the felt quality of a groove is a motor-intentional feel'.[13] As Sean Kelly writes:

> [i]n motor-intentional activity, in other words, there is not an independent way we have of understanding the object […]. Rather, our bodily activity is itself a kind of understanding of the object.[14]

At the same time as it helps me to reach this understanding of bodies as time- and motion-based media, my video practice also offers up the same experience to the bodies of its own audio-viewers.

While I was still thinking through these fusions of sensual and cognitive experiences and their role in film *studies*, Adrian Martin recommended I take a look at Nicolas Abraham's book *Rhythms*, a rare and fascinating attempt to fuse phenomenological approaches to cultural texts with psychoanalytic approaches.[15] When I did so, I encountered the following, fascinating anecdote:

> [s]eated in the compartment of a train, I distractedly contemplate the receding landscape. Without paying any particular attention to it, I feel myself surrounded by a whole world of presences: my fellow passengers, the windowpane, the rumbling of the wheels, the continually changing panorama. But now here I am, for the past moment or so, nodding my head, tapping my foot, and my whole body is vibrating to the beat of a rhythm that seems unending. What has happened? A radical change of attitude must have taken place within me. Just a minute ago the monotonous rumbling of the wheels striking the joints of the train was simply *there*, like my neighbors in the compartment or the land-

> scape I was contemplating. But from the moment my body embraced the cadencing of the wheels, the surrounding objects appeared to lose their solidity and they took on the flavor of an almost dreamlike unreality. This is an observation that can be extended generally to any rhythmizing attitude.
> […]
> But a consciousness of unreality cannot be simultaneous with a perceptive consciousness. […] In this sense, instead of saying a 'perception of rhythm', it would be better to speak of a 'rhythmization of perception'.[16]

This perceptual shift Abraham registers between 'solidity', or reality, and an 'almost dreamlike unreality' has been a longstanding focus of much film spectatorship theory. It is the very move that has been deemed to be at the heart of film spectatorial experience. It may also be at the very heart of many videographic film and moving image studies viewing experiences too – especially of more poetic, less obviously 'explanatory' ones.

This may be one of the reasons why these emergent practices and forms sometimes attract scepticism in the scholarly context, at least in relation to written studies, which more often maintain a 'proper' distance from their objects of contemplation. I would argue that what experimental works like mine so often try to do is to explore and frame their own focused 'rhythmizations of perception', to forge purposive audiovisual experiences that are created out of and at the same time *convey* (in several senses of that word) some of the medium-specific syntheses at the centre of spectatorship. Film studies in the groove may have much to teach us, if we can only let ourselves be carried away by them.

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About the author

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Notes

1. 'Vivian Sobchack in Conversation with Scott Bukatman' 2009: http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/xmlpage/4/article/338.
2. Cairns 2015.
3. Cited in Hediger 2014.
4. Kelly 2002a.
5. Sobchack 2004, p. 76.
6. Published at *Filmanalytical*, 29 August 2011: http://filmanalytical.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/touching-film-object-notes-on-haptic-in.html. See 'Bonus Tracks', *Frames Cinema Journal*, 1.1, July 2012: http://framescinemajournal.com/article/bonus-tracks/.
7. Marks 2004.
8. 'Hallon' by Christian Björklund: http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Christian_Bjoerklund/Skapmat/christian_bjoerklund_-_skpmat_ep_-_01_-_hallon.
9. 'Groove (Music)', *Wikipedia* entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groove_(music) (accessed on 21 April 2015).
10. From Lévi-Strauss 2007 (orig. in 1959/1963), pp. 47, 59-60; and from Shaviro 1993, pp. 255-256. Both citations in Sobchack 2004, pp. vi, 61.
11. 'Kinetic typography', *Wikipedia* entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinetic_typography (accessed 21 April 2015).
12. Roholt 2014, p. 135.
13. Ibid., p. 111.
14. Kelly 2002b, p. 132 (cited by Roholt 2014, p. 100).
15. Abraham 1995.
16. Ibid., p. 21.